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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the scene of Cinna's death in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. I argue that more than just portraying the horrors of mob rule, the scene of Cinna's death specifically implicates mob rule because of its tendency to undermine the value of the traditional Roman naming system. Ultimately, Cinna's death is best understood as a thematic analogue to Brutus' death because they both similarly illustrate the rule of violence in the absence of respect for the power of names.

For his 1937 production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Orson Welles found in the death scene of Cinna the Poet the encapsulation of his interpretation of the play's central themes. Visually alluding to fascist rallies of the 1930s, the cruel, darkly comic murder illustrated the dangers that ensue when a manipulative leader goads the masses into senseless mob violence. So powerful was Welles' depiction of Cinna's death, which usually was cut entirely from previous performances, that it became "perhaps the most celebrated feature of the production" (Ripley 228).

To be sure, Welles' interpretation seems to have emphasized many of the most salient features of Cinna the Poet's death scene, particularly its indictment of mob violence. However, this paper will argue that underlying all of these ideas are examinations of names and their relationship between one's physical person and self-conception. Indeed, names, their manifestations and their influence on one's character drive much of the tragic action. Both Brutus and Caesar obsess over names, particularly their own, and their effect. Ultimately, then, Cinna's death scene functions not merely to demonstrate the savagery of mob rule but to also show that mob rule terrifies because it deconstructs the importance of names in favor of violence against a physical body. In doing so, Cinna's death scene functions as an illustration of the stakes of Brutus' own equivocations about his belief in the traditional Roman naming system.

To begin, Cinna's death in act three, scene three transitions from the plebeians' interrogation of Cinna's name to violence against his body. That Cinna's death begins with a demand for his name emphasizes both the importance of names as a central motif and even further, highlights the political upheaval that Antony's speech has caused. The first plebeian demands, "What is your name?" (3.3.5). The first plebeian's question internally alludes to Murellus and Flavius' interrogations of the commoners in the opening scene of the play. In that scene, the two tribunes clearly revel in their superior ranking over the commoners. For example, Flavius criticizes the commoners when he abruptly commands them "Hence, home, you idle creatures" (1.1.1). Murellus and Flavius' demands for the identifications of the commoners is indicative of their superior social status. Thus, by evoking Murellus and Flavius' display of power, the plebeian's demands for Cinna's name indicate a transfer in power. In fact, the Second Plebeian's command to Cinna "Answer every man directly" paraphrases Murellus statement to "Answer me di-

rectly" (3.3.9; 1.1.12). The plebeians who murder Cinna take up a power similar to that of the tribunes. Cinna's death becomes "a violent inversion of the opening scene" (Moisan 288). At the crux of this transfer is the demand for the name of another. Thus, Cinna's death delineates the relationship between names and political stability.

Clearly, the societal structures within *Julius Caesar* position one's name as a marker of one's status. In his essay "*Julius Caesar*: A Roman Tragedy," Ralph Berry explains that the characters "are excessively conscious of nomenclature. They refer often to their names as a kind of externalized self" (328). In turn, the characters must ensure that their actions adhere to this "externalized self" that their name represents (329). Berry's framing of the significance of names sheds light on the political nature of the characters. Caesar himself best exemplifies the way in which the characters shape their names. For example, Caesar confides to Antony that "Yet if my name were liable to fear, / I do not know the man I should avoid / So soon as that spare Cassius" (1.2.200-02). In this remark, Caesar articulates his acute awareness of his name's political significance. Though he may personally fear Cassius, he knows that such a fear would damage his name.

Nevertheless, though a powerful political tool, names in *Julius Caesar* are double edged. On one hand, Caesar's diligent protection of his name's esteem allows him to become immortal in a way. Caesar boasts:

> And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
>
> Yet in the number I do know but one
>
> That unassailable holds on his rank
>
> Unshaked of motion; and that I am he. (3.1.67-70)

In this passage, Caesar sharply contrasts mankind's physical form with his externalized self-conception. His name allows him to transcend the restrictions that the human body imposes on everyone else. His body no longer carries the weight of his authority, but instead his name will forever allow him to keep his "rank" as dictator. His name will loom large after his death. Yet, conversely, this very protection of his own identity results in his death. Decius persuades Caesar to go to the forumdespite Calpurnia's warningsby appealing to his political name. Decius warns that the critiques of Caesar as a henpecked husband "were a mock / Apt to be rendered" (2.3.96). Here "mock" plays upon both of its meanings: as an offensive remark and also as a construction of a counterfeit imitation (mock, n3). Thus, Caesar fears not simply the senators' scorn but that their scorn would construct a new reputation for him. Caesar must quell any new conceptions of his honor that would compete with his "true fixed and resting quality" (3.1.61). That this very demand upon his honor leads to his death signifies that Caesar, like the other Romans, must maintain his name at all costs.

Many scholars have examined the death scene of Cinna the Poet in regards to the way it portrays the play's conceptions of the relationship between one's name and body. In particular, Norman Holland argued in his influential essay on the scene of Cinna's death that the plebeians' "questions stab at Cinna as the conspirators' importunities and their daggers do at Caesar" (440). Holland links Cinna's and Caesar's deaths as symbolically related. He expands that "Cinna is, like Caesar, killed not "for the thing he is", but for "what he is augmented" (441). Holland likens the mob's refusal to accept Cinna as Cinna the Poet rather than Cinna the Tribune to Brutus' impossible wish to kill Caesar's political ambition but not the man himself (2.1.16970). As a result, Holland concludes that "The Cinna episode, as miniature of Caesar's death, identifies Brutus' motives with those of the mob" (443). Yet contrary to Holland's reading, the application of Ralph Berry's understanding of names, discussed above, reveals that there is a subtle yet crucial difference between Brutus and the mob. Brutus honors the traditional

political weight given to names which Berry describes; the mob rejects the importance of names entirely.

To elaborate, the death of Cinna the Poet represents the utter collapse of the name's importance in society. In response to the crowd's interrogations, Cinna presents his name as his defense (3.3.28). In doing so, he erroneously places trust in the institution of names for which the mob has no respect. The Fourth Plebeian illustrates this rejection of the worth of names when he says "It is no matter, his name's Cinna. Pluck but / his name of his heart, and turn him going" (3.3.32-3). Importantly, this phrase echoes when the Fourth Plebian, incensed by Antony's speech, exclaims "Pluck down forms, windows, anything!" (3.2.248). In the Fourth Plebeian's eyes, then, far from the significance that characters like Caesar imbue in them, names are merely empty vestiges of power, comparable to furniture in the forum. For the mob, names are subjective and can be outright dismissed.

The play maintains that the consequences of this dismissal are dire. Within the structure of names that Caesar abides by "the name acts as a model of self, imparting a standard of conduct to which Romans are to adhere" (Berry 328). As a result, the Roman system of externalized names promotes a moral code among the people. Yet, the Fourth Plebeian dismisses Cinna's appeal to his title as Poet by commanding "Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses" (3.3.27). The literary critic Sigurd Burckhard explains that this phrase demonstrates that "with the social order no longer there to mediate, language deteriorates into the disembodied and the crudely physical" (375). The absence of deference to names leaves only violence against the body as means of demonstrating discontentment.

As a result, Brutus' character does not correspond as squarely with the mob's mentality as Holland claims. In fact, Brutus feels obligated to live up to the standard which his own name places upon himself. Cassius provokes Brutus by saying, "There was a Brutus once that would have brooked / Th' eternal devil to keep his state in Rome / As easily as a king" (1.2.100-02). This invocation of L. Junius Brutus, Brutus' supposed ancestor, provokes Brutus to action. Further, Cassius uses this same rhetorical appeal to the historic importance of Brutus' name when he forges "Writings, all tending to the great opinion / That Rome holds of his name" (1.2.312-3). The letters are to be placed upon "the old Brutus' statue" (1.3.146). Cassius knows that he must frame the murder of Caesar in a way that conforms to Brutus' conceptions of his own name. Brutus, like Caesar but certainly unlike the mob, highly esteems the worth of his own name. Even Cassius' infamous taunt, "Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that 'Caesar'? / Why should that name be sounded more than yours?" both affirms the importance of the Roman naming system while also diminishing the import of Caesar's own name (1.2.143-4). Thus, according to Ralph Berry, this speech from Cassius to Brutus definitively confirms Brutus' belief in "name as containing vital essence, of name as an objective reality in itself" (329). Brutus too strongly believes in the value of names to be identified with the mob as Holland suggests.

Nevertheless, as Holland acknowledges, Brutus' murder of Caesar does indicate an equivocation of Brutus' ideals about names. Brutus tries to justify his equivocation to the masses when he says "As he was valiant, I honour him. But as he was ambitious, I slew him" (3.2.24-5). In this sentence, Brutus justifies his actions by saying that his violence against Caesar was not really an assault on his physical person but an assault against the threat Caesar's presence represented. Brutus sees the murder as a "sacrifice" not as a "butchery" (2.1.166). For Brutus, violence against the body can only be justified when the physical violence is the only way to harm another's name. Thus, Brutus' murder of Caesar simultaneously affirms and undermines Brutus' belief in the value of names. Although his killing of Caesar may have a similar effect, namely bodily violence, as the killing

of Cinna, Brutus' conflicted temperament firmly separates him from the mob's general unthinking irreverence.

It is my contention that Cinna does not represent Caesar but instead serves as an analogue for Brutus. Both Brutus and Cinna die as a result of their conceptions of names. For Cinna, the conception is the mob's mischaracterization of him as Cinna the Tribune. Cinna dies because his name has lost its meaning. Similarly, Brutus dies when his self-conceptions, which are rooted in his name, begin to fail him. By the end of the play, Brutus' conception of himself as a liberator like his namesake begins to lose its "vitality and meaning in Acts IV and V. Brutus and Cassius become weary automata" (Berry 333-4). In the closing scene of the play, Brutus still futilely tries to act as a noble liberator which he believes his name demands of him. However, just as Cinna's name offers no refuge against the mob, Brutus' belief in the significance of his name does not matter on the battlefield.

Further, just as with Cinna, Brutus' misplaced faith in the power of names results in violence against his body. The literary critic Charles Martindale argues that in the last Act, "Brutus is forced to beg his comrades one by one to hold the sword for him and only succeeds on the third attempt" (127). On one hand, this repeated insistence demonstrates Brutus' conviction in his own philosophical ideal. This resolve in his own conceptions allows Brutus to believe that he "shall have glory by his losing day" (5.5.36). However, that he needs to commit suicide in order to obtain this reverence emphasizes just how far Brutus has fallen. Brutus had the ambition to live up to the reputation his ancestors had created when they killed the king (2.1.53-4). By the play's closing, this possibility is untenable; suicide is his only recourse. In Brutus' death just as in Cinna's death, bodily violence is the only possible conclusion when names lose their significance.

Ultimately, then, Cinna's death scene forcefully epitomizes the concerns that dominate *Julius Caesar*. In particular, the black comedy of his misidentification gestures towards a wider anxiety about names and their importance in establishing both one's identity and one's relationship to the rest of society. His brutal death is the consequence of society's wider rejection of traditional conceptions of power. Thus, Cinna's death is a conceptual foreshadowing of Brutus' death in Act five. Perhaps most hauntingly, Cinna's death demonstrates that the most valued institutions of a society can be dismissed at any moment. More horrific than a murder that results from a mistaken identity is a murder where the identity of the victim is meaningless.

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